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"Fuck off to the tampon bible": Misrecognition and researcher intimacy in an online mapping of 'lad culture'

Abstract

Digital forms of networked misogyny have received much attention of late, both in public and academic discussions of changing gender relations. However, less work has paid attention to how lad culture emerges online, or how the researcher experiences the affective fabrics therein. In this article we explore our engagement with platforms hosted by the companies UniLad and The Lad Bible. We define our experience of this field as intimate because: 1) we downloaded them onto our personal mobile devices and social media accounts, and 2) of how they are experienced as proximal, 'sticky' and deeply affective (Ahmed, 2004). We approach digital lad culture through a methodology of misrecognition, drawing on the work of Sarah Ahmed, Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Fraser. We show how accounts of the researcher's own experiences through a methodology of misrecognition are crucial, providing new ways of researching, and, in turn, new ways of challenging, the digital proliferation of misogyny and sexism.

Keywords: misrecognition, researcher intimacy, lad culture, networked misogyny, sexism.

Introduction

In this article, we engage with what it means to understand 'misrecognition' as methodology when the researcher's intimacy with a research field is experienced as problematic or troubling to the researcher's own identity. We draw on our experiences of researching what has become known in the UK as 'lad culture', typically associated with sexism and misogyny on University

campuses and cultures of sport and drinking therein (Phipps and Young 2015a, 2015b). Lad culture's spatial location on University campuses has been accompanied (if not surpassed) by its digital manifestations. Here we focus on our experiences of engaging with two of its most prominent digital platforms: UniLad and The Lad Bible.

In this article, we conceptualize our research practice as intimate, first, because of how UniLad and The Lad Bible were located on our social media profiles (alongside friends, partners etc.) and personal devices (such as phones, laptops and tablets), and second, because of the deeply affective ways that, as feminist researchers, we were moved by and engaged with it. Below, we explore what it means to understand our intimate interactions with UniLad and The Lad Bible through a methodology of misrecognition. We outline what such a methodology might look like by locating it in a broader field of 'affective methodology' and 'networked misogyny'. We then explore how misrecognition has been used, and define our own methodology as psychosocial, in that we understand psychological and seemingly individual experiences as inter-subjective and intricately connected to the social and cultural worlds that we inhabit.

To provide such an account, we draw on concepts of affect and mis/recognition from the work of Sara Ahmed, Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Fraser. While each are located in different philosophical traditions, bringing them together helps create a methodological framework that accounts for the experiential, psychodynamic and political implications of lad culture. With this framework, we ask: What can a methodology of misrecognition contribute to new forms of knowledge about digital intimacy, affect and gendered subjectivity? And what challenges does such a methodology engender? We suggest misrecognition as methodology has the capacity to provide a rigorous account of the researcher's position, and that these in turn could help create new ways of understanding the experiences of networked misogyny and sexism in digital culture.

Affective and Networked Misogyny

The 'turn to affect' has provoked much work in the humanities and social sciences, exploring how sensations, emotions and feelings are representative of, and sometimes in excess of, political life (Wetherall, 2012; Leys, 2011). There is often ambiguity on the relationship between emotion and affect, with some using the two synonymously. Broadly speaking, however, emotion is often associated with the cognitive, conscious and discursive; whereas affect has been understood as the bodily sensations that are beyond language (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

We recognize the distinction between emotion and affect, but also acknowledge the methodological dilemmas this raises. These dilemmas include how to research 'affect' when it is understood as emerging from bodily sensations, leaving much empirical work (often undertaken, at some level, through language) unable to access 'affect' (Knudsen & Sage, 2015). Some have argued that, in locating affect so deeply within the body, affect theory is simply a reversal of mind/body binary, only this time with the body as primary (Leys, 2011). Others have questioned the celebratory tone of some affect theory as 'post-political', beyond language, discourse or representation, critiquing work in this tradition as ignoring or turning away from the ideological (Hemmings, 2005; Tyler, 2008). How we understand affect is situated in approaches that have emerged from feminist theory, where the textual, discursive and ideological are also seen as sites to affect and be affected: as spaces where affect circulates (e.g. Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Ferreday, 2009; Kuntsman, 2012; Wetherall, 2012). Following this tradition, we use the textual-discursive spaces of UniLad and The Lad Bible to explore our own affective experiences of lad culture.

With the above caveat in mind, our methodology of misrecognition is located in a growing interest in the affective components of digital culture (for example, work in collections

edited by Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012 and Hillis, Paasonen & Petit, 2015). A recognizable facet of this research reflects a cultural shift to a 'popular misogyny', a term Banet-Weiser (2015) uses to define the way patriarchal structures have responded to a highly visible 'popular feminism'. Of this popular misogyny, Banet-Weiser (2015; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016) highlights a networked misogyny, 'a technologically enhanced public discourse that explicitly threatens sexual violence and other forms of violation' (2015, n.p.), which we turn to below.

Networked misogyny is deeply and intentionally affective, and this is evident in a number of widely publicized instances. A mediated visibility surrounds networked misogyny: for example, in 2014, and more recently in 2017, in what has been dubbed 'The Fappening[i]', significant numbers of female celebrities had mobile devices hacked to steal and publish intimate, often nude, photographs. Over the last few years, concerns have been raised about the normalization of rape (Buchwald et al. 2005). Regular stories have documented young women committing suicide following the publication of images of them being raped, which in turn has led to instances of cyber-bullying, where the image is digitally recirculated (Dodge, 2016). Women have also become the target of sexual assault, rape and death threats: for example, female game developers were the subjects of 'doxing' in 2014, where hackers posted personal details (home address, telephone numbers) online to intimidate the developers. One of the platforms that we explore in this article, UniLad, was brought down in 2012 following criticism when an article claimed, "85% of rape cases go unreported. That seems to be fairly good odds", concluding that "UniLad does not condone rape without saying 'surprise'".

Researchers have also taken an interest in the affective culture of networked misogyny. Jane (2016) has documented the sexual violence experienced by female gamers and the 'digilante' efforts of feminist activists to challenge rape and death threats, arguing for a hybrid

form of collective action to counteract networked misogyny (see also Huntermann (2015) for an account of sexism in gaming, and Horeck (2014) and Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose (2016) for accounts of digital feminism). In Jane's (2014) discussion of her own experiences of 'e-bile', itself a term that associates networked misogyny with the intensity of affect, she argues that simply being a woman in public provokes misogynistic hostility (see also Shaw, 2014). To demonstrate the affective tenor of this content, she argues e-bile 'must be spoken of in its unexpurgated entirety because euphemisms and generic descriptors such as 'offensive' or 'sexually explicit' simply cannot convey the hostile and hyperbolic misogyny' (p.559).

In other work on networked misogyny, Dodge (2016) addresses the dissemination of rape images and videos online through Butler's (2007) discussion of torture photography and the 'digitization of evil'. Dodge (2016) argues that the normalization of rape culture means these images become legitimate and humorous, which in turn allows for the extension of the pain, horror and shame of the victim. The practice of trolling has also been examined as being one that is both highly gendered and highly affective (Mantilla, 2015). Vera-Gray (2017), for example, discusses her experience of the trolling of her own research on street harassment, when she opted to recruit participants online. Drawing on a feminist methodology, she uses the experience to make sense of the comments and the emotional labour in having to manage comments. Meanwhile, others, like Massanari (2017) who has used actor-network theory to explore #gamergate and The Fappening on Reddit, have show how the platforms contain functionalities and algorithms that make sexist, misogynistic and anti-feminist threads more likely to be shared.

Given the work cited above, it is interesting to see how lad culture – notorious for its sexist attitudes – is also part of this networked misogyny. In the UK, 'lad culture' has become associated heavily with Universities and male-dominated, homosocial cultures of drinking and

sport that promote sexism and misogyny as 'banter' (Phipps & Young, 2015b)[ii]. However, no research has yet explored lad culture's digital platforms, despite companies like UniLad and The Lad Bible being immensely popular. UniLad was launched in 2010 and, following the site's closure in 2012 due to scrutiny over its promotion of rape culture, was rebranded and re-launched in 2014. With similar editorial content, The Lad Bible promotes itself as "one of the largest community for guys aged 16-30 in the world". Launched in 2012, it too has been significantly rebranded since inception. It is currently one of the most popular websites in the UK, which is regularly explained as it being the digital contemporary to 'lads mags' like Zoo and Nuts (e.g. Burrell, 2015). Both platforms focus heavily on video content, and have long held first and second spots on video marketing platform Tubular Insights, who monitor viewing figures across platforms (e.g. Facebook, YouTube). Latest figures (July 2017) have The Lad Bible listed highest with more than 3.1 billion views, and UniLad as second, with just less than 3.1 billion[iii].

In addition to the paucity of research on lad culture's digital platforms, there has been little work on the researcher's affective experiences in a culture of networked misogyny. While the exact, uncensored content of networked misogyny creates an affective reaction for the reader in its full, published form (Jane, 2014), less work has documented the feelings that pass through the researcher when networked misogyny is the field where they conduct research. Broadly drawing on our framing of affect and emotion above, we now turn to the intimate components of our research, before situating this intimacy through a methodology of misrecognition.

Researcher Intimacy as Misrecognition

Both UniLad and The Lad Bible are multiplatform, existing on Facebook, Twitter, SnapChat, Instagram and YouTube, as well as their own standalone websites. In terms of our mapping of

these spaces, we have both downloaded the Apps. Silvia uses Facebook, and so followed the Facebook pages of both UniLad and The Lad Bible. Adrienne has a Facebook account, but isn't a regular user. Her strategy for engaging in the site has been daily calendar reminders to check the Facebook pages. This approach has led to less organic and intrusive interaction, and less of a feeling that these impinged on 'private' space. Equally, she has been following both groups on Twitter, but the platform's functionality dramatically shaped the interaction, including the less visible comments and the 'formal' tone of Twitter more generally.

We both experienced comparable emotional reactions emerging from our engagement with these platforms. The most negative responses emerged from comments by users of UniLad and The Lad Bible. As suggested above, both companies have rebranded themselves following significant public pressure over accusations of inciting misogyny, rape and violence towards women, so our negative reactions to comments were coupled with confusion, interest, indifference and amusement at the more general content promoted by the companies. The larger project under which this activity took place is interested in understanding what it feels like for University students who experience lad culture[iv]. Therefore, we took this digital engagement as an opportunity to explore how we experienced lad culture ourselves, as feminist researchers.

In downloading apps and liking/following Facebook and Twitter feeds, we both inadvertently made these lad culture platforms part of our intimate lives. van Doorn (2013) describes the intimacy of the phone within the research context as like carrying the field in his pocket (p.390). Our experience certainly created a sense of intimacy, and we explore this in our discussion below. However, we also experienced intimacy through the very nature of doing research, where our proximity with lad culture produced an affective relation. While intimacy is commonly understood as warm and comforting (see Berlant, 1998 for a critique), we here define

researcher intimacy more as engendering notions of familiarity, proximity and through affect itself, as an intense and (seemingly) personal sensation. In Ahmed's (2004, 2010) account of how affect travels, she suggests that social objects (e.g. words) that carry the emotional baggage of "personal and social tension" are sticky and accumulate other sticky objects as they move between different spaces and through history (2010, p.44). In asking how signs become sticky, Ahmed (2004) suggests that hate speech, like the word 'Paki', sticks to particular bodies and, through historical repetition, to other sticky signs – "immigrant, outsider, dirty" (p.92). According to Ahmed, stickiness is the outcome of contact or proximity, or equally the desire to maintain distance from the object. To have a sign stick, therefore, involves relationality: "things become sticky as an effect of encountering other sticky things" (Ahmed, 2004 p.91).

Drawing on Ahmed (2004), we could therefore understand lad culture as sticky because it reflects the personal and social tensions of new gender relations, including its symbolic and physical violence, and also because of relations of distance and proximity. Others too have noted the way proximity relates to intimacy, even when intimacy is defined by anger, resentment, disgust and fear. Kuntsman (2012) suggests that the intimacy of digital cultures emerges through touch. In her account of how war and militarism become digitally mediated, she argues that technology is defined through touch (e.g. tapping the screen, the phone in our pockets), but also in digital culture's ability to 'touch us' in ways that are deeply personal and political. Likewise, we propose we are intimate with lad culture because it 'touches' us: it makes us feel.

The way we are conceptualizing intimacy in our methodological framing of our research with lad culture is neither unproblematic nor straightforward. Our intimacy with lad culture was ambivalent, creating a sense of disidentification and non-belonging. However, we recognize the possibilities of this disidentification, which could provide opportunities for different ways of

reading and writing (Butler, 1993; Lykke, 2014), especially, we would argue, in digital culture. Thus, our understanding of intimacy is not something inherently positive or comfortable. It is an intimacy defined by its ambivalence, which we discuss below in relation to mis/recognition.

To be misrecognized means, broadly, to be out of place. Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity allow us to think about how recognition misses its mark. For Benjamin, to experience recognition, and thus to feel like a subject, means recognizing that the world consists of others, who are similar yet separate from the self (see also Ahmed's (2000) account of mis/recognition and 'the stranger' as the basis of subject formation). Benjamin's definition of recognition speaks to us as another (very different) sticky affect, whereby the subject is in "a relation in which each person experiences the other as a "like subject," another mind who can be "felt with," yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception" (Benjamin, 2004, p.5). To be recognized, for Benjamin (2007), is opposed to a dyadic relation of 'the doer and the done to', or what Benjamin terms 'complementary twoness'.

However, while such a co-created experience might bring us into a state of self-awareness that is deeply affirming, feminist theorists who have developed recognition note that often subject formation is more of a 'one way street'. As Benjamin (2004) too notes, to attribute subjective equivalence to an other as we do to ourselves, and to feel that in return, is rare and difficult. Most dyadic relationships in which we are part of take the form of 'complementary twoness'. Others have identified issues with the 'identity politics' model that such forms of recognition engender, which we explore below in relation to the work of Nancy Fraser.

Coming from more of a political science-oriented perspective, Fraser (1998) suggests that feminist theory's shift from the politics of distribution (i.e. Marxist) to recognition (i.e. identity politics) means that frameworks for justice are uneven, ignoring how recognition is shaped by

institutional and economic inequality. She takes to task approaches that merely criticize the cultural devaluing of, for example, femininity. Such approaches, according to Fraser (1998), are problematic because in arguing for the recognition of culturally coded 'feminine' characteristics, such approaches miss other intersections through which inequality functions (e.g. class, race, ethnicity, sexuality) and privileges particular ways of enacting gender (see also Baum, 2014).

Fraser's (1998) approach to mis/recognition thus recognizes both distribution and recognition as necessary in gaining full social participation as a "like subject". Fraser's approach also moves our framework beyond an individualized, psychological perspective that could be politically supportive of the current neoliberal model of the self. Instead, we understand misrecognition as "not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem" (Fraser, 2000, p.113). That is, our methodology is interested in understanding misrecognition as both the psychic mechanisms of our researcher selves and the social structures of patriarchy, sexism and misogyny.

Misrecognition has been an important analytical device in understanding how class and sexuality mark different bodies in drinking cultures (Skeggs, 2001; Taylor, 2007), and in research on gender and emotion in education (Burke & Crozier, 2014). In contrast to these empirical examples, we are concerned with how we experience and engage with misrecognition, specifically as two feminist researchers engaging with the sticky space of lad culture.

In what follows, we demonstrate the usefulness of a methodology of misrecognition to better account for the way "feelings might be how structures get under our skin" (Ahmed, 2004, p.216). To do so, we draw on the psychic and structural accounts of mis/recognition identified

above. We use both to create a psychosocial approach, where cultural norms and institutions interact to create a culturally dominant gaze through repeats encounters with the research field. These repeat encounters also shape the psychic formation of researcher identity, so that both the social and the psychic are inextricably intertwined and irreducible (Fraser 1997, p.281).

On Being Misrecognized

Below we provide a two-part analysis on how we experienced our engagement with UniLad and The Lad Bible. In the first part, we focus on the affective fabrics of UniLad and The Lad Bible, through the content that we saw in the comments section. In the second part, we turn to the intimate relations that we experienced through our changing intimacies with our personal mobile devices and how the research challenged our digital and non-digital relationships with others.

"... Once a feminazi sees this"

As mentioned earlier, UniLad and The Lad Bible have rebranded themselves, changing their content to more general humor and interest stories to widen their reach beyond their previous University-based, heterosexual, male audience. Throughout our research we witnessed this in the inclusion of what's become colloquially known as 'click bait'. The stories posted by UniLad and The Lad Bible was inoffensive. It was the interactions between people who comment on their posts where UniLad and The Lad Bible's rebranding attempts had failed.

Largely based in the comment sections of the Facebook pages, we witnessed many interactions that were similar to those explored by other researchers interested in networked misogyny (Jane, 2014, 2016; Shaw, 2014; Vera-Gray, 2017). The most vitriolic comments appeared when a handful of commenters question the humor of posts (by contrast, only a few

commenters seemed prepared to challenge the gendered nature of the content or the sexism prevalent in the comments). In one exchange, for example, three separate commenters indicated their dislike for a post, claiming the content was not funny. In response, the following emerged:

All you bell ends having a moan. Fuck off to the tampon bible

Says the guy called kayla you sir are funny as fuck

Yup, i [sic] guy called Kayla ; ***FeministAlert***

No chill

First question is what are all these females posting doing out of the kitchen, dumb bitches

Lmao

Hey man, do you have a link to The tampon bible?

---[v] it's funny since I have a sense of humor and I'm not a gapping pussy like you

Above it is implied that the original commenter, disapproving of the content on the basis of humor, was inauthentic in their gender – attempting to pass as a man – and therefore must be a feminist, trolling the conversation for anti-feminist sentiment. In another series of interactions, a female commenter questions the humor of a video posted by The Lad Bible. This is followed by:

Shudup [sic]

I hate people like you. Life is full of comedic value and laughter Nazis like yourself are always trying to spoil the fun.

What a stupid comment! The woman is borderline retarded! I 100% guarantee you're a feminist and a far left sjw [social justice warrior]! Please leave planet earth

These conversations demonstrate a toxic mix of sexism, female/feminist denigration, misogyny and annihilation ("Please leave planet earth") that is, we would argue, representative of the lad culture discourse that UniLad and The Lad Bible have attempted to distance themselves from (Phipps and Young, 2015a). Contra the postfeminist double articulation of feminism, where feminism is called on to show it no longer counts (McRobbie, 2009), or the 'knowing wink' of sexist irony (Gill, 2007), the desire expressed above is to completely silence any feminist discourse ("Fuck off to the tampon bible"). This is despite feminism not being explicitly mentioned by comments that provoke these responses: instead, the above conversations occur after a statement that the content is not humorous. We read a symbolic violence that attempts to monitor and survey those who engage with the sites, creating clear 'us' and 'them' boundaries. Thus as feminist researchers entering this space, we are 'strangers', judged affectively and in turn respond affectively (Ahmed, 2000). We are not, given the cultural structures that shape this space, able to engage as "a full partner in social interaction" (Fraser, 2000, p.113).

Alongside the silencing of people questioning the humor of content, there was also applause for generic, potentially 'ironic', sexist statements. In one example, a commenter states of video content: "I think she's just doing what most women do: The opposite of what they should do". The comment received 601 likes at the time we witnessed it - just 12 hours after - and provoked others to comment: "Something tells me you are going to get a lot of notifications once a feminazi sees this comment", "Best comment hands down". Such celebration of having a space to vocalize and applaud sexism, coupled with the expectation that its intentionally affective tone would incite a 'feminazi' reaction (a term that itself is designed to prompt affect (Cole, 2015)), delegitimizes the 'other', silencing the possibility of meaningful retort.

Given this content, it became increasingly difficult to acknowledge the 'popular feminism' propagated by the rebranding of both UniLad and he Lad Bible. Banet-Weiser (2015) has suggested the turn to a popular feminism represents a shift in postfeminist sensibility, whereby feminism is silenced or made to seem overzealous when feminism appears acceptable. She suggests this is made more difficult when contemporary articulations of popular feminism do little to challenge patriarchal structures or acknowledge the intersectional structures that shape inequality. Nor, we would add, does popular feminism seek to open up channels to move away from "complementary twoness" and towards becoming "like subjects" (Benjamin 2004).

Thus when we encountered pro-feminist content or pieces that represented minority groups, the content both shatters self-recognition and encourages us to explore flaws in UniLad and The Lad Bible's rebranding, as demonstrated in the extracts below.

Extract 1

Silvia sends me an image on WeChat, a screen grab of a post on Facebook celebrating International Women's Day. Underneath she has written 'so confused'. I instantly screw my face up to understand. Why is she confused about international women's day?! The post reads: "That's why International Women's Day is so incredibly important". Yes I totally agree that it's important - so what's the problem? I struggle a little harder, trying to work out what's wrong with the post. Then it hits me. Of course, UniLad are bigging up International Women's Day. What a farce. (Adrienne)

Extract 2

Publishing articles on women 'slamming sexism' or celebrating transgender people mean nothing when such platforms promote and endow the misogyny visible in the comments section and sanctioning it. How can I then not be suspicious when encountering alleged 'open' and 'progressive' articles that 'endorse' women and other marginalized groups in society? I don't believe it. I cannot believe it. I just refuse. They do not mean it, otherwise they would try to control what goes on to their comments section, right? It is a façade, a very problematic one. (Silvia)

Extract 1 demonstrates a moment of realization that reconfirms the self through identifying the other, and resolves the confusion that could have occurred between researchers who otherwise do experience each other as "like subjects"[vi]. While the extract could be read as misrecognition of UniLad and a refusal on our behalf to accept genuinely pro-women sentiment, this needs to be read in the context of wider experiences, both structural and subjective. This includes knowledge of comments like those above, and the 2012 controversy around the statement that "UniLad does not condone rape without saying 'surprise'". In Extract 2, Silvia makes explicit reference to these institutional frameworks that reinforce rather than challenge sexism and misogyny[vii].

Acknowledging our gut reactions to this content, as "farce" and "façade", is not to suggest that women-friendly sentiments did not create ambivalence. There were also many occasions where "click bait" drew us in, creating the affective pleasures associated with the circuits of the digital, where "one is pulled between incomprehensibility and extreme intimacy" (Dean, 2015, p.96). These moments created a tension between wanting to acknowledge Unilad or The Lad Bible and feeling ideologically unable to, producing a split between the affective pull of gender-inclusive sentiments and our knowledge of the structure of lad culture. However, this was

often resolved again by the comments. For example, after The Lad Bible posted a story of a trans-woman and her fight against transphobia, the comments section included the following:

Fuck up with all this bullshit man. Identify as whatever the fuck you want, but you are either born a man or a woman so I will call you he or she. And if you have a problem with that, go fuck a pineapple.

If your [sic] born with a dick your [sic] a man

Not a chance I'm clicking that link, remember folks, there is no such thing as chicks with dicks, only guys with tits

This offends me as a vegan transgender atheist who vapes and crossfits 4 times a week and im [sic] also a male feminist as I identify as a pastafarian apache helicopter dog mega multi combo god

Above, the transphobic response to content that appears to challenge transphobia reconfirms The Lad Bible as a space for laddish content. The existence of trans-positive content is framed as appealing to those with an absurdist identity politics, the "vegan transgender atheist who vapes and crossfits 4 times a week", who is positioned as oppressive, censorious and easily offended. By contrast, transphobia is constructed as logical through biological essentialism, "you are either born a man or a woman", "If your [sic] born with a dick your [sic] a man".

Above we have given a sense of discussions taking place on the UniLad and The Lad Bible. However, exploring our otherness, which we believe is central to our methodology of misrecognition, can deepen this account. Below we turn to our own experience of becoming intimate with UniLad and The Lad Bible, and how this interacted with our own sense of self.

The Other in the Phone

Our methodology of misrecognition incorporates an intimacy defined through proximity and distance, shaping the way affect comes to stick through our relation to objects (Ahmed, 2004). Shortly after downloading/following lad culture, we automatically identified a strangeness and uneasiness at the existence of these apps and pages on our personal devices and accounts. We were suddenly dislodge, 'out of place', because of the content on our phones.

Extract 3

I developed a strange relationship with my phone the following days. Love and hate does not represent what I experienced, it was more like addiction/regret. I must admit that, for the 90% of the time, my phone is an extension of my right arm. I am always on it, from reading the news to checking social media. However, this addictive relationship was temporary scattered after incorporating lad culture into it through the apps and Facebook. It's like I don't trust it anymore. (Silvia)

Extract 4

I've purposely placed both apps on the second page of my iPhone screen, with memory games and meme creators – things I've downloaded but don't use so often. They're not part of my everyday use of apps on my phone, I don't have to look at them so much. It takes effort to look at the apps on the second screen. And when I do, the fact that they look similar makes them stand out. Black boxes with white text. Sat together there alongside bright greens and blues and purples. Like they're not really meant to be there. (Adrienne)

Like other accounts of research intimacy, our engagement with UniLad and The Lad Bible meant that the field was always with us, in affectively close proximity (van Doorn, 2013; Ahmed, 2010). The extracts above demonstrate the tensions we experienced in having this object with us all the time, where the intimacy of the phone is understood as a relationship in and of itself: an extension of the self. The phone is a guarantee of a safe space, of our private and intimate life closely linked to family and friends. To experience the content within the phone as other to the self is understood as a breaking of the trust we usually invest in it.

The above extracts also demonstrate the strategies we engaged with to keep the phone safe and maintain our trust. Misrecognition here means finding a place on the phone's interface where lad culture can't intrude in the phone's everyday use. Adrienne, for example, experiences placing the apps on the 'second screen', visually separating them from other apps she uses more, therefore marking them out as different.

There was also evidence in our notes of concerns around how our intimacy with others more 'like-us' could become fractured. Here, our methodology of misrecognition highlights the relational components of subjectivity, where misrecognition exists not only in a dyadic relation between self and other, but in broader networks of digital and non-digital intimacy. For example:

Extract 5

A lot of questions started popping up in my head: what would other people think when they see I liked their page? Would they think I am a fake feminist or that after all I like a bit of laddish banter as well? How will I cope with seeing their publications on a daily basis among those of my friends and other pages that I follow? (Silvia)

Extract 6

I'm slightly itching to write a comment. I'm not a commenter normally, but the possibility of commenting is quite tempting. Who would I comment as? Could I comment as myself? No - that would just provoke and I'd be afraid of the response. Or could I pretend to be someone else? What would my alter-ego self say? Who would see my comment? I give up and close the page. (Adrienne)

Both extracts demonstrate how we were not only illegitimate subjects in the digital space of these webpages and apps, we were also fearful of being misrecognized by others. In Extract 5, this appears as a fear of appearing like a 'fake feminist' to others in our digital social sphere. While in Extract 6, writing a comment as the self - the feminist, the woman - is impossible, while pretending to be someone else is unimaginable because of a concern with others seeing the interaction. Thus no subject position is tenable. This anxiety was the product of the public nature of social media: our private selves intersecting with public performances (Hjorth & Lim, 2012).

The concern we had for others' perception of us, as potentially disingenuous 'fake feminists', was also evident in personal relationships. Even here, in less public performances of the self, we found ourselves scrambling to reconfirm a coherent, feminist sense of self:

Extract 7

My partner asks to use my phone for something. He turns to me with a puzzled look on his face, and asks with some bemusement why I have The Lad Bible and UniLad apps! I feel an instant sense of embarrassment and shame. I quickly respond: "it's for research", but having joked for

years about watching or reading crap "for research", it feels like a get out. I proceed in depth to explain the purpose of having these apps on my phone. (Adrienne)

Close personal intimate relationships are the space of recognition, where the dyadic relationship is experienced as two people interacting as though each are similar yet separate (Benjamin, 2004). In the extract above, the fear of being misrecognized as not the subject that the significant other believed one to be produces the affective response of embarrassment and shame. The existence of the other in the phone threatened to reveal the self as disingenuous.

Despite the strategies discussed above to manage the intrusion of lad culture into our private spheres, we found ourselves rarely successful. We had purposefully chosen to engage in this project, and becoming intimate in research is necessary for the research to 'work'! Our Twitter feeds and Facebook pages became a constant reminder that we were engaged in this project. For Adrienne, as discussed, this was experienced as a daily notification from her calendar at 5pm to look through the Facebook page, which as we have noted was far less intrusive and serendipitous as Silvia. The sound of the calendar's reminder was the same as other email and diary notifications, marking it as an activity associated with worklife. By contrast, Silvia's intimate life beyond the research began to be shaped by her Facebook feed:

Extract 8

I wanted to go on Facebook and scroll down like I always do in the mornings before getting ready for my day, but that day I couldn't. What if I start getting bombarded with laddish things? It wouldn't only be awful for my mood, but also it would mean to start blending my private breakfast time with research stuff. Right at 6 AM while having a bowl of porridge, the last thing I

wanted to do is to get reminded by my personal Facebook and my personal phone about everything I have to do for my thesis. (Silvia)

As the extract above implies, to research lad culture through social media was to allow something other into infiltrate all parts of the normal day, including the private and mundane activity of waking up. The extract is both a separation and distance from the physical object of the phone and its possible contents, and a constant reminder of the research itself. While the affective labour of academic life has been well noted (e.g. do Mar Pereira, 2015; Gill, 2014; Gregg, 2013), the above extracts demonstrate the affective labour involved becoming intimate with a research field when you do not "love what you do", where the research field (in this case for a PhD) is distressing and at odds with the researcher's feminist identity.

We have suggested above that researching lad culture can be framed by a methodology of misrecognition because of how the research troubles the self and is experienced as something other. Culturally, the products of lad culture are to be experienced as 'fun' and 'humourful', even while they represent the pervasiveness of sexism and misogyny. Like Ahmed's (2014) 'affect aliens', we are "estranged by virtue of how [we] are affected" (p.14). We do not get the joke; indeed the joke makes our intimate use of technology feel strange, and so misrecognition becomes part of the affective fabric as we struggled to engage with lad culture (Kuntsman, 2012). However, we would also argue that such experiences of being misrecognized provided new insights into lad culture and networked misogyny:

Extract 9

I still can't believe how judgmental it is. Posts that look like they would provoke sexual comments just don't, instead they're aggressive and hateful. I see one story about a photographer who's travelled around the world taking naked images of herself. Here we go, I thought, the usual sexist and objectifying "I would" type "banter". But no. They HATE her… she's ugly, she's attention seeking, she's stupid. The hostility to any woman doing anything makes me feel speechless (Adrienne)

The extract above expresses feeling immobilized – it "*makes me feel speechless"*. In this instance, the movement of lad culture into online platforms became striking because sexually objectifying language was less prominent than we imagined. Although sexual objectification was present, its visibility was far exceeded by judgment (by both men and women).

We believe such observations were made possible by becoming intimate with lad culture, in a relationship that was experienced as and framed through misrecognition. The affective tones and culturally dominant gazes that were emerging from UniLad and The Lad Bible were not performing masculinity as juvenile, sexist humor, but as hate. In as much as the internet can have an institutional structure, we would suggest that the immobilizing hostility referred to above is afforded by UniLad and The Lad Bible precisely because of their rebranding, so that such sexism and misogyny exists only beneath the surface of the company's outward facing platforms. Such a shift needs the urgent attention of feminist researchers, if we are to challenge the normalization of misogyny in these popular platforms, in our Universities, and more generally in society.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have provided an account of our engagement with lad culture's digital mediation, to provide new insights through a methodology of misrecognition, situated in an approach that understands affect as sticky (Ahmed, 2004, 2010), alongside other research on the broader culture of networked misogyny. We have drawn on Benjamin's psychoanalytic account where the psychic processes involved in recognition produce a dyadic relationship between analyst and analysand, with each seeing the other as a subject with a similar yet separate self. Recognition is the ideal of intimate relations, yet, as Benjamin identifies, is rarely achieved.

Reading Benjamin's notion of recognition alongside Fraser (2000) offers us an approach to misrecognition that pays equal attention to the distribution of resources, including power. We have applied this methodology of misrecognition to understand how being close to the other, as an intimate relationship, shapes researcher subjectivity. While intimacy is often understood as a positive affect, our research demonstrates how the hostile research field sticks and leaks into our private lives, calling on us to secure the boundaries between research, the field, and ourselves.

Such an approach to methodology calls for new ways of conceptualizing intimacy in our relationships to the digital, as research increasingly goes online to understand new gender relations. Working intimately with such texts focuses the researcher to engage with feelings of fear, disgust, anxiety and not-belonging. Such sticky feelings leave the researcher as an 'affect alien' (Ahmed, 2014), but are important to stick with if we are to continue developing accounts that deepen our understanding of sexism and misogyny in on and offline spaces. While more traditional frameworks for carrying out research may position our approach as 'researcher bias' or as a problematic representation of masculinity (given that we are women, feminists etc.), we argue that all researchers carries such risk and it is important that we critically engage with those positions. We believe that misrecognition as methodology has the capacity to provide a rigorous

account of the researcher's position, and that these in turn could help create new ways of understanding experiences of sexual harassment, sexism and misrecognition.

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[i] The term deriving from the portmanteau of the film The Happening, where a mysterious breeze kills its victims, and the slang term 'fap', meaning masturbation.

[ii] The term 'lad culture' is culturally and historically diffused and difficult to pin down. For example, Phipps and Young (2015b) show how the term 'laddish' was used in the 1950s to define readers of magazines like Playboy; it is also reminiscent of the working class 'new lad' constructs of the 1990s. In relation to class, our student participants in the larger study had difficulty defining 'the lad', sometimes associating him with cigarettes, beer cans and hoodies, and other times with rugby shirts and the financial capacity to drink and socialize, both falling on opposite ends of cultural stereotypes of class. Lad culture is also globally slippery. For example, in Silvia's previous educational experience in Spain, the term 'lad culture' didn't exist, while behaviors that could be defined as laddish did. Concurrently, British lad culture shares much with the American 'frat boy' culture. These issues raise a number of questions beyond the scope of this paper, but include the naming of 'lad culture' as a useful device to mobilize feminist action, but also concerns that in naming it, we risk deeming invisible both historical and global instances of sexism, misogyny and violence against women in contexts where such terminology do not exist.

[iii] See http://tubularinsights.com/top-online-video-creators/

[iv] Much work has been done on objects that are hostile to the researcher's sense of self, from influential work where researchers have infiltrated right-wing fascist groups (Billig, 1979) to projects with violent men (Gottzén, 2013; Cowburn, 2013). A significant body of work has explored what it means for feminist researchers to interview men (e.g. Pini, 2005; Willott, 1998). This work highlights the emotional, ethical and methodological implications of such research. However, our interest was in our own reactions, and not 'the lad' *per se*. This focus is couched within the context of the larger research project exploring the emotional, affective reactions of young people who experience lad culture. Future research is needed with those who identify as or are otherwise associated with lad culture, which we believe could draw on and make a valuable contribution to the bodies of literature we reference here.

[v] Name removed for anonymity.

[vi] Although we should recognize here the inherent power differences and what might be termed "complementary twoness" between the two authors, as the supervisor (Adrienne) and the supervisee (Silvia) of a PhD project (see Green, 2005 for a psycho-social account of the PhD supervisory relationship).

[vii] Such reflections in our data are worthy of a longer discussion concerning censorship, and the misapplication of censorship online, for example when Facebook has deleted breastfeeding women, anatomical drawings of vulvas and Nick Ut's 'The Terror of War' photograph, commonly known as 'Napalm girl', despite its permission of other sexist content.